

"Self Soul-Care: A Challenge for Self-Directed Learning"

Larry Dixon, Ph.D.

A recent visit to a Chick-Fila restaurant reminded me of a central issue in the Christian life. A cardboard advertisement on the table mocked boring breakfasts. Cereals with names like "Frosted Monotony," "Stale Puffs," and "Bland-O's" did the trick, suggesting that such breakfasts provide half the flavor and are "chock full of stale mediocrity." How like some of our experiences in living out the Christian life! Part of the solution to stuck, stale spirituality is self soul-care.

In speaking of self soul-care, we are not suggesting that we are to direct our learning towards ourselves or that we should neglect godly teachers of the Word of God. Rather, we mean that we must stop blaming others for our lack of spiritual growth. We must take responsibility for where we are in our Christian lives.

The great theologian Calvin (and Hobbes) illustrates this point. Calvin says to Hobbes, "Nothing I do is my fault. My family is dysfunctional and my parents won't empower me. Consequently, I'm not self-actualized." He continues, "My behavior is addictive functioning in a disease process of toxic codependency. I need holistic healing and wellness before I'll accept any responsibility for my actions!" Hobbes says to him, "One of us needs to stick his head in a bucket of ice water." To which Calvin replies, "I love the culture of victimhood." We all do, don't we?

May I suggest that we not only need to stop blaming others, we also must reject any notion of spiritual osmosis. We do not grow in the Christian life simply by attending meetings and "being under the sound of the Word." Our problem, if I may be so blunt, is that we hate doing homework, we avoid studying at all costs, and we're not sure we want to take responsibility for our own lives.

I. Some of the Problems We Face in Self Soul-Care:

Before we look at two primary biblical passages, let me suggest three problems which keep us from engaging in serious, strategic self soul-care. The first I call *voluntary illiteracy*. Functional illiteracy refers to those who want to read but can't. Voluntary illiteracy refers to those who can read, but don't. John Wesley said, "It cannot be, that the people should grow in grace, unless they give themselves to reading. A reading people will always be a knowing people."

A second problem in self soul-care I call a "spoon-feeding frenzy." Sharks go on a feeding frenzy. I believe many of us Christians go on a spoon-feeding frenzy. That is, we live off second-hand Bible study, second-hand devotions, second-hand *living out* the Christian life.

A third problem why we don't fully engage ourselves in self soul-care is that there are few challenges to do so. Many of us have no non-Christian friends who ask us hard questions. We also frequently lack any exposure to genuine unbelief. I am convinced that, for those who have been Christians for a while, reading what I call "books that will boil your blood before you get past the preface" will challenge us and make us grow. Books like Charles Templeton's *Farewell to God* or Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* will get us digging into the Word of God for ourselves.

II. Two Texts That Challenge Us to Self Soul-Care:

Paul writes to the Colossians: "So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness." (Col. 2:6-7). Note the two stages of the Christian life: (1) receiving Christ Jesus as Lord, and (2) continuing to live in Him. In fact, the "continuing to live in Him" is actually a command: "continue to live in Him." How can I know if I am continuing to live in Him? Paul gives us three tests: (1) I will be rooted and built up in Him; (2) I will be strengthened in the faith I

was taught; and, (3) I will be overflowing with thankfulness. Quite simply, I will be *growing, glowing, and overflowing*.

But the primary text I'd like to look at with you is a well-known passage. Would you do me (and you) a favor? Pretend that you've never seen the following passage before. Ready? Here's a passage I'll bet you've never seen before:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Mt. 11:28-30)

What a great text! Never seen it before? Well, it fits our discussion quite nicely. May I suggest the following outline:

- I. The Invitation (v. 28)
- II. The Invitees (v. 28)
- III. The Promise (v. 28)
- IV. The Commands (v. 29)
- V. The Explanation (vv. 29-30)

Let's look at these fantastic statements from the Lord Jesus. First of all, the Invitation (v. 28). Biblical Christianity begins with an invitation. John Stott discusses how an invitation often has the cryptic letters "RSVP" at the bottom of the invitation. This is a French request to "please reply to the invitation." Stott says, "There was a couple who found political asylum in this country during the Second World War. They came from East or Central Europe. And they were not really well-versed in Western culture. One day they received an invitation to a wedding. And there, at the bottom of the invitation, were those cryptic letters: RSVP. And in his thick European accent, the husband said, "VIF, VAT does it mean? 'RSVP'? I don't know VAT it means!" So they thought for a while and then suddenly inspiration dawned on him. And the husband said, "VIF. I know VAT it means! It means 'REMEMBER SEND WEDDING PRESENTS!'"

Many fail to understand that Christianity begins with an invitation, not a demand. It is an invitation, please notice, not to a philosophy, or a religion, but to a *person*. Here's a tough question for us all: Is it possible to be in this thing called Christianity but have little to do *personally* with Jesus Himself?

Let's now notice the Invitees (v. 28). Jesus' invitation is clearly to those who "are weary and burdened." The term "weary" refers to those who are physically tired or emotionally discouraged. The word "burdened" can mean weighed down with troubles. Those who are not weary or burdened aren't being invited!

Jesus' promise (v. 28) is quite simple: "I will give you rest." There are several possibilities as to the meaning of this rest which Jesus promises. This word is used in Mark 6:31 to refer to physical rest, in 2 Corinthians 7:5 to a rest from trials, and in I John 3:19-20 to a rest of heart. I would suggest that the meaning is most likely a rest from one's own works. If the rest that Jesus promises refers to the rest of salvation in Him, then His invitation is to those who are tired of trying to earn their own salvation apart from Christ. We read in Hebrews 4:10 that "anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his."

We next notice the two commands (v. 29) which Jesus issues to those who come to Him. His first command is to "take my yoke upon you . . ." What an interesting juxtaposition: He has just promised rest in verse 28. Now He commands those He has invited to voluntarily take upon themselves His yoke, a symbol of work. Jesus does not promise unemployment to those who come to

Him. I understand that the great American humorist Will Rogers said during the Depression, "100,000 Americans ain't working, but, thank the Lord, at least they've got jobs!"

Jesus invites His followers to become co-laborers with Him in the work of the Kingdom (see also I Cor. 3:9; Col. 4:11). When I was a teenager, "Dobie Gillis" was a popular TV program. Dobie's best friend, Maynard G. Krebs, was a hippie-like character who mooched off others. Whenever he heard the word "work" he would, in today's vernacular, *freak* and shout, "WORK! WORK?" There is work for each of us to do -- and Jesus is inviting us to volunteer for that work.

The second command which Jesus gives to those who come to Him is also in verse 29: "and learn from me." Here He invites us not to labor but to *learning*. What in the world makes us think that learning is optional? Our lives—as well as our eternity—will be spent learning from Him and about Him!

I am again helped on this point by a profound Calvin and Hobbes cartoon strip. Calvin is in his rain gear, waiting for the school bus, and he says, "Why in the world am I waiting in the pouring rain for the school bus to take me somewhere I don't even want to go?" The next frame shows the rain coming down in buckets on him as he stands beside his mailbox at the street. In the last frame he says, "I go to school, but I never learn what I want to know."

Jesus invites all of us to "learn from me." Flannery O'Connor, who lived long before Calvin and Hobbes came on the scene, actually attacks Calvin's problem directly when she writes, "The high-school English teacher will be fulfilling his responsibility if he furnishes the student a guided opportunity, through the best writing of the past, to come, in time, to an understanding of the best writing of the present. And if the student finds that this is not to his taste? Well, that is regrettable. Most regrettable. **His taste should not be consulted; it is being formed.**"

That's exactly right. When we come to Jesus to learn from Him our tastes are not being consulted. They are being formed. Our problem is we don't know what it is that we need to know. It is the teacher who sets the educational agenda. As a seminary teacher, I'm deeply committed to training students for ministry. The issue is not so much what am I teaching as what are my students learning? The fundamental idea in the word "disciple" is not discipline, but *learner*. What's involved in being a learner? Certainly an attitude of wanting to learn, a need to grow in knowledge, and a curiosity (an eagerness to learn). I don't know about you, but I am alarmed at what I perceive to be the lack of curiosity on the part of many Christians. Dorothy Parker has said, "The cure for boredom is curiosity. There is no cure for curiosity."

Two other elements are involved in learning: a teacher and basic study skills. We must resist the seduction of our post-modern culture that suggests that no one has the answers, that no story is absolute, that no teacher has authority. Teaching is highly esteemed in the Scriptures; those who would be elders must be "able to teach" (I Tim. 3:2). I am convinced that many sincere believers in our churches could use a refresher course on basic study skills. How does one study a passage of Scripture? How does one develop an outline? How can one improve his or her reading skills?

When I was a student at Emmaus (shortly after all the dinosaurs had become extinct), I remember my problem with learning. I made C's and D's. You see, I had an attitude. Not a good attitude either. If I had an exam on Tuesday, on Monday night I would flip a quarter. I said to myself, "If it lands on heads, I'll watch 'Monday Night Football' until the wee hours of the morning. If it lands on tails, I'll play chess with my roommate for several hours. But *if it lands on its edge*, I'll study for my exam!"

My life changed dramatically when my wife-to-be came to Emmaus my second year. She saw great potential in me and decided to do something to inspire me. She said, "You are capable of doing so much better academically than you are doing." "Yes, Dear," I said, half-heartedly agreeing with

her. "No, I mean it. In fact," she said, "I will not date you this coming Saturday if you do not ace your doctrine exam this Friday!" Romantic blackmail. It worked! I aced that exam and was on the dean's list every semester thereafter. Anybody love you enough to romantically blackmail you into becoming a better learner at the feet of Jesus?

Please notice that Matthew 11:28-30 concludes with Jesus' explanation. Jesus says, ". . . for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." We learn about Christ's character in verse 29—He is gentle and humble in heart. Matthew quotes Isaiah 42:3 when he says in his next chapter about the Messiah, "A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench, till he send forth judgment unto victory." (Mt. 12: 20). This is certainly a clear reference to His gentleness. Christ again guarantees rest in verse 29, a soul-rest which makes perfect sense to those who commit to His labor and learning from Him. Jesus then speaks of His uniqueness in verse 30 when He says, "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Have you found His yoke to be easy and His burden to be light? Some scholars suggest that the meaning of His yoke being "easy" is that it would be non-chaffing. One says that perhaps Joseph's carpenter shop had a sign over it that read, "We make non-chaffing yokes." The point is that Jesus knows what we can handle -- and He crafts individual yokes for each of us. How about His burden? I must admit that sometimes I feel that His burden is anything but light. I can easily become overwhelmed with my burden for this lost world. But when I allow my burden to overshadow His strength in my life, I have taken on too much.

A burdened heart is a healthy heart, if that burden is from the Lord. May the prayer of your life and mine be, "Lord, I want to grow in grace, and not groan in disgrace."